

Good afternoon,

Please join us **tomorrow at 2:00 pm (EST)** for a **World Affairs Councils of America (WACA) *KNOW NOW* conference call** featuring **Mohammed Ali Abdallah, Political Advisor for U.S. Affairs to the Prime Minister of Libya**. This is a timely conversation as we recently observed the grim anniversary of Khalifa Haftar's April 4th attacks on Tripoli that derailed the peace negotiations. In his role as Political Advisor, Mr. Abdallah has spent the last year engaging Members of Congress and their staff as well as Trump Administration officials in a campaign to course correct from President Trump's fateful call to Haftar last April 15th which upended past U.S. policy in Libya.

Mr. Abdallah – a former Libyan Member of Congress and President of the National Front Party – is a rising leader in the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) and will provide key insights and updates about the ongoing conflict in Libya. He will join WACA President and CEO Bill Clifford for a thoughtful and lively discussion about the GNA's important work fighting COVID-19, Haftar's continued human violations, the detrimental economic consequences of Haftar's oil blockade, the ongoing proxy warfare, and the GNA's successful efforts to counter Haftar's year-long military campaign among other topics.

If you or a colleague of yours would like to RSVP, please fill out the [registration form](#). This event is free and open to the public.

Please note if you cannot join tomorrow, the conversation will be recorded and made available as a podcast. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at cmurphy@mercuryllc.com.

Thank you and we hope you can join this important conversation.

Best,
Chris

Call Description: The conflict and violence that has handcuffed Libya's progress post-revolution continues to plague Libyans' efforts to revitalize and rebuild the war-torn country. In cooperation with the international community, Libyans established the interim Government of National Accord to unite the country's factions and build a stable civil society. In April 2019, Khalifa Haftar and his forces launched an attack on Tripoli to overthrow the GNA, instigating a war that over the past year has killed more than 2,200 people, displaced over 200,000, and made oil-rich Libya the center of an international proxy. One year after Haftar began his advance on Tripoli, join Mr. Abdallah and WACA President and CEO Bill Clifford to discuss the state of the war in Libya, the role of external powers, and prospects for resolution.

Speaker Bio: Mr. Mohammed Ali Abdallah is the Political Advisor for US Affairs to the Prime Minister of Libya, leader of the US- and UN-recognized Government of Libya.

For a number of years, Mr. Abdallah was a prominent member of the Libyan opposition in the diaspora in the United States. In 2012, during the first democratic elections held in Libya in over four decades, Mr. Abdallah won a seat in the General National Congress, Libya's parliament. He was elected from the 9th District of Misrata (Libya's 3rd largest city). During his term in office, Mr. Abdallah served as the Chairman of the Financial Planning, Budget, and Finance oversight Committee. In that capacity, Mr.

Abdallah was instrumental in revising the development and operational budget process, establishing a structure to de-centralize financial spending, as well as introducing structural reforms in local governance. As a member in the Telecommunications and Transportation Committee, Mr. Abdallah led efforts to establish a regulatory body to oversee the telecom sector, paving the way for increased private investment in the industry. Mr. Abdallah served as President of the National Front Party, (the third largest political party in Libya), from 2012 until 2017.

During the UN-led political dialogue process, Mr. Abdallah served as a member of the Political Dialogue Committee, which resulted in the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) at the end of 2015. He continued to play a significant role in the political dialogue amongst the different political factions and helped de-escalate conflicts paving the way for consolidation of GNA governance and UN return to Tripoli. His continuous involvement included a role in the ongoing negotiations aimed at expanding the consensus around the LPA and facilitating democratic transition of power.

Mr. Abdallah graduated from Lafayette High School in Lexington, Kentucky in 1993. From there he went on to earn multiple degrees from the University of Kentucky, including a degree in Telecommunications & Data Management (2000) and a degree in Business Management (2000).

Disseminated by Mercury Public Affairs, LLC, a registered foreign agent, on behalf of the Government of National Accord Libya, Office of the Prime Minister. More information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

ERIK PRINCE OFFERED LETHAL SERVICES TO SANCTIONED RUSSIAN MERCENARY FIRM WAGNER



[Matthew Cole](#), [Alex Emmons](#)

April 13 2020, 11:15 a.m.

ERIK PRINCE, FOUNDER of the private security firm Blackwater and a Trump administration adviser, has sought in recent months to provide military services to a sanctioned Russian mercenary firm in at least two African conflicts, according to three people with knowledge of the efforts.

Prince, who is the brother of Trump Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, met earlier this year with a top official of Russia's Wagner Group and offered his mercenary forces to support the firm's operations in Libya and Mozambique, according to two people familiar with Prince's offer.

Wagner officials said they are not interested in working with Prince, three people familiar with their decision told The Intercept.

A lawyer for Prince denied that his client met anyone from Wagner.

The Wagner Group is a semi-private military force that operates in countries or conflicts where the Russian government seeks plausible deniability for its activities. It is often equipped and supported directly by the Russian Ministry of Defense, [according](#) to [reports](#) and experts who track Wagner's activities. The U.S. State Department [website](#) also lists Wagner as an entity connected to the "Defense Sector of the Government of the Russian Federation." Any business relationship between Prince and Wagner would, in effect, make the influential Trump administration adviser a subcontractor to the Russian military.

Disseminated by Mercury Public Affairs, LLC, a registered foreign agent, on behalf of the Government of National Accord Libya, Office of the Prime Minister. More information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

In recent years, the Russian government has deployed Wagner to several African countries, Ukraine, and Syria, where [the U.S. military killed dozens of Wagner fighters in 2018](#) after the Russians and their Syrian allies attacked an oil facility that the United States was defending.

“Wagner Group is an instrument of Russian policy. It works under the GRU, which is the Russian military intelligence,” said Sean McFate, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a former military contractor who has written about mercenaries.

In attempting to do business with Wagner, Prince may also have exposed himself to legal liability. In 2017, the Trump administration [sanctioned Wagner](#), as well as its founder and head Dmitry Utkin, for having “recruited and sent soldiers to fight alongside [Russian-backed] separatists in eastern Ukraine” during the 2014 Russian invasion. The Russian government denied involvement in the invasion, even as its forces occupied and took control of Crimea, also in Ukrainian territory, in violation of international law.

The sanctions prohibit individuals or companies from providing “financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services to or in support of, any person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to this order.” They also forbid anyone “to have acted or purported to act for or on behalf” of Wagner. The 2017 addition of Wagner to the sanctions list builds on a [2014 executive order](#) signed by President Barack Obama.

“In my experience, the act of soliciting from a sanctioned party would indeed be an apparent violation,” said Brian O’Toole, a senior fellow with the Atlantic Council and former senior sanctions official at the Treasury Department. “Whether you make that [legal] case is an entirely separate matter,” he said, adding that pitching business to Wagner “would seem to be a fairly egregious thing to do.”

When Prince met with Wagner leadership, he was already under [federal investigation](#) for violating arms trafficking regulations. The proposal to the Russian firm also raises questions about whether

Trump administration officials authorized the meeting or were aware of Prince's efforts to work with the group.

A former Navy SEAL who rose to prominence and notoriety as head of the private security firm Blackwater, Prince has been a vocal supporter of President Donald Trump, serving as an unofficial adviser on military and foreign policy issues in Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. Prince was a Trump donor in 2016 and has worked to support the president politically while proposing private military solutions that would benefit his companies financially.

Early in the Trump administration, Prince proposed privatizing the war in Afghanistan and supplying Trump with a [private spy service](#) intended to circumvent the U.S. intelligence community. Neither proposal succeeded, despite having support for some of his ideas from senior administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

For years, Prince has tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to win military contracts with governments in Africa and the Middle East. Wagner has become an increasingly visible player in the region as Russia's influence there has grown, allowing the country to operate under the radar at a time when "plausible deniability is more powerful than firepower," according to McFate, the mercenary expert.

"The reason why groups like Wagner exist, and the reason why people like Erik Prince [are] succeeding, is that modern war is getting sneakier and mercenaries and groups like Wagner are a great way to get things done in the shadows," McFate said.

Libya has been divided and in conflict since the U.S. and NATO allies removed longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi in 2011. The United Nations and most of the international community, including the U.S., recognize the Government of National Accord in the Libyan capital Tripoli as the country's official leaders. But the eastern portion of the country is led by strongman Khalifa Hifter, who tried last year to take Tripoli. Both sides are backed by foreign powers that have continually violated a U.N. embargo on military support. Turkey and Qatar have

supported the GNA, while Russia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt have backed Hifter.

Last spring, Hifter's forces, the Libyan National Army, moved to take Tripoli, but were thwarted within days. Hifter turned to [Moscow](#) and [Wagner](#). Americans are prohibited from aiding either side of the conflict without U.S. government authorization.

At the same time, Prince sought to provide a force in Mozambique, where the government has been fighting a small insurgency over the past two years. President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique flew to Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in August 2019. The countries signed several trade pacts, and Russia agreed to send military aid. Russian military hardware and Russian nationals working for Wagner arrived in Mozambique in September, [according to news reports](#).

After Wagner lost more than a dozen fighters in Mozambique, Prince sent a proposal to the Russian firm offering to supply a ground force as well as aviation-based surveillance, according to documents viewed by The Intercept and a person familiar with Prince's proposal.

Prince has also served as an adviser to the de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, known as MBZ, for more than a decade. Under bin Zayed's leadership, the UAE, a close regional ally of the U.S., has intervened militarily in several regional wars in the Middle East and Africa. A pariah during the Obama administration, Prince was taken in by the Emirati crown prince and awarded a contract worth hundreds of millions of dollars to create and train a presidential guard for the royal family. He was later removed for mismanagement, among other reasons.

Prince also has ties to China. He is co-chair of Frontier Services Group, a Hong-Kong based logistics company he founded and whose largest investor is the Chinese government. The Intercept has previously [reported](#) that the U.S. government has investigated Prince for his ties to China's intelligence service. The conflicts between Prince's commercial interests and the goals of the many governments that retain his services have piled up as Prince has tried to sell

military and mercenary capabilities around the world. FSG, for example, signed a contract for fishing rights in Mozambique around the same time Prince began exploring defense contracts there. The fishing contract has since been dissolved, according to the company.

“The conflicts of interest are deep and threaten democracy when you have a free agent going between the U.S. and its main power rivals,” said McFate. “It would never clear an intelligence community background check. This is a dangerous thing for any democracy.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR:

Matthew Cole

matthew.cole@theintercept.com

@matthewacole

Alex Emmons

alex.emmons@theintercept.com

@AlexEmmons

<https://theintercept.com/2020/04/13/erik-prince-russia-mercenary-wagner-libya-mozambique/>

The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It

Russia wanted more leverage over an aspiring Libyan strongman. The White House provided it by assenting to a disastrous civil war.



By **David D. Kirkpatrick**

April 14, 2020 Updated 9:11 a.m. ET

TRIPOLI — Early last spring, just before a planned American-backed peace conference between warring factions in Libya, the aspiring Libyan strongman Khalifa Hifter arranged a phone call with John R. Bolton, then the White House national security adviser.

Mr. Hifter did not want to talk peace.

A former Libyan Army general and onetime C.I.A. client, Mr. Hifter wanted a White House blessing for a surprise attack to seize Tripoli, the capital, before the peace talks commenced.

Mr. Bolton did not say no.

The attack, launched last April 4, backfired badly. Mr. Hifter failed to capture Tripoli, overextended his forces and restarted a civil war — killing thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands more. The fighting has cut off the flow of Libyan oil, injected new volatility into the region and severely diminished Washington's influence.

But one apparent winner has emerged: the Kremlin. Russia has operated with cold-eyed cynicism, taking advantage of three years of muddled messages from the Trump administration to become a critical kingmaker in Libya, a geopolitical prize with vast energy reserves and a strategic location on the Mediterranean.

Mr. Bolton's call with Mr. Hifter — described by a former senior administration official as well as three Western diplomats briefed by both Mr. Hifter and American officials — appears to have played into the Russian machinations.



John R. Bolton, who became national security adviser in 2018, in the Oval Office last August. Mr. Hifter, a former general in Libya, spoke to Mr. Bolton before beginning an offensive to seize Tripoli, the Libyan capital. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Days before the call, private Russian operatives in Libya reported to Moscow that Mr. Hifter was a flawed and outmatched military leader sure to fail if he ever tried to conquer the capital, according to secret Russian documents seized in Tripoli and viewed by The New

York Times. The operatives saw opportunity in his weakness and suggested that Russia could win leverage over Mr. Hifter if it sent mercenaries to bolster his so-called Libyan National Army.

“Russia will maintain a loyal and strong ally in the structure of the LNA,” the operatives argued, “which Hifter will have to contend with.”

Washington’s inconsistent position on Libya — officially supporting the peace process even as the White House has signaled that President Trump favors Mr. Hifter — has played a major role in prolonging the chaos. The absence of a strong American policy has opened the door to interference from competing American partners, including Turkey, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

Yet it is Russia that is now best positioned to dominate Libya.

An arm of the Kremlin controls dozens of social media accounts promoting Mr. Hifter and other favored clients, including the eldest son of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, Libya’s former dictator, according to the operatives’ report. The same Kremlin operation has acquired an ownership stake in a pro-Qaddafi Libyan satellite network and advised a pro-Hifter network as well, the operatives wrote.



The Russians have consulted with Libya Alhadath, a satellite news channel in eastern Libya that broadcasts pro-Hifter propaganda. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

At the same time, the Russian military has worked behind the scenes to surround Mr. Hifter with many of its old partners from the Qaddafi-era security forces, encouraging Qaddafi henchmen to return from exile. The Kremlin also has built ties to a potential governing party-in-waiting, the documents show.

And the Kremlin followed the operatives' prescient advice. When Mr. Hifter's assault stalled, Moscow propped up his sagging advance with thousands of trained mercenaries who continue to operate in Libya.

Representatives for the White House and Mr. Bolton declined to comment.

But alarmed American lawmakers have begun asking how the White House appears to have ended up backing the same side as Moscow.

During a recent Senate hearing on Libya, lawmakers wondered how the United States could fault Russia for propping up a client when the White House appeared to like him as well. The president sounded "inclined to support Hifter" even as the State Department seemed to oppose him, said Senator Mitt Romney, the Utah Republican.

“Is there consistency?” Mr. Romney asked.

“I can say unequivocally,” David Schenker, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, insisted with exasperation, “We do not support the Hifter offensive.”



President Trump with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates, at the White House in 2017. Al Drago for The New York Times

Courting the President

A campaign to get the White House behind Mr. Hifter started almost as soon as Mr. Trump was elected.

Mr. Hifter’s most important patron, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, pitched Mr. Hifter to members of Mr. Trump’s foreign policy team at a secret meeting in New York in December 2016, according to a person with knowledge of the meeting.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, whom Mr. Trump has jokingly called “my favorite dictator,” also took up the Hifter cause five months later when he visited the White House.

“Hifter was a core talking point in every meeting with the Egyptians and Emiratis,” said Andrew Miller, a member of the National Security Council staff at the beginning of the Trump administration and now a researcher at the Project on Middle East Democracy, a Washington-based nonprofit.

Libya had foundered in chaos since a NATO air campaign helped oust Colonel Qaddafi during the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. Extortionist militias, militant extremists and migrant traffickers ran amok as the country was divided into fiefs. Officially, the United States recognized only the United Nations-sponsored provisional government in Tripoli.



A January gathering in support of the United Nations-backed government in Tripoli. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

But Crown Prince Mohammed and Mr. el-Sisi told Mr. Trump that the provisional government was hopelessly weak and riddled with Islamists. They argued that only Mr. Hifter could prevent Islamists from taking power in Tripoli, which the Arab leaders said

would create a domino effect across the region, according to two former senior administration officials.

Mr. Hifter had vowed since 2014 to eradicate political Islam and take power as Libya's new military ruler. Yet he had quietly formed an alliance with a rival faction of extremists, Saudi-style ultraconservatives known as Salafis.

As they lobbied Mr. Trump, Crown Prince Mohammed and Mr. el-Sisi overlooked that contradiction. They were also simultaneously working closely with Russia. Egypt had opened a secret Russian base to supply Mr. Hifter's forces, to the alarm of Western officials worried about Moscow's expanding influence.



President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt took up the Hifter cause when he visited the White House in 2017. Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

The two Arab leaders, though, found a sympathetic ear in Mr. Bolton, who became national security adviser in the spring of 2018 and had previously led a far-right think tank known for sweeping attacks on political Islam.

The Bolton-Hifter phone call last spring came at a critical moment. Even as the peace talks were approaching, Mr. Hifter had moved his forces into a strategic oasis town south of Tripoli and was poised for a surprise attack.

When Mr. Hifter asked for consent, Mr. Bolton's answer was "a yellow light," not a green or a red one, the former senior administration official said. Yet three Western diplomats briefed on the call by both Mr. Hifter and senior American officials described Mr. Bolton as less equivocal: If you are going to attack, do it quickly, he told Mr. Hifter, according to all three diplomats.

Mr. Hifter counted that as an explicit assent, all three diplomats said.

The April 4 attack stunned the world. The United Nations secretary general, António Guterres, had just landed in Tripoli for the peace talks. He urged Mr. Hifter to pull back, a message endorsed by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. American military forces hurriedly left the city.



The Old City of Tripoli. When Mr. Hifter's assault on Tripoli stalled, Moscow stepped in with thousands of trained mercenaries. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

But as the fighting was underway, Mr. Hifter's powerful allies were lobbying Mr. Trump to show his support, White House officials said. Mr. el-Sisi pressed the president in person last year on April 9, and Crown Prince Mohammed over the phone on April 18.

The next day, the White House said in a statement that the president had called Mr. Hifter to commend his "significant role in fighting terrorism." A day after the call, Mr. Hifter's forces began shelling civilian neighborhoods of Tripoli.

"It seemed as if the Americans were switching sides in a way that didn't make sense," said Peter Millett, the British ambassador to Libya until 2018, noting that the Tripoli government had been the main Libyan partner to the United States military in counterterrorism.

"There was confusion and massive surprise in the international community," he said.

Col. Ahmed Mismari, a spokesman for Mr. Hifter, declined to comment on the call with Mr. Bolton but said the Libyan commander appreciated the president's support.



Mr. Hifter, top center, facing Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov of Russia at a meeting in Moscow in 2017. Ivan Sekretarev/Associated Press

Russian Hedging

Even before the assault on Tripoli began, the Russians had concluded it would be a disaster for Mr. Hifter.

The Russian operatives in Libya worked for an obscure research center linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin. Mr. Prigozhin is also described by American officials as the leader of a Kremlin-linked private security company, the Wagner Group. Their teams of mercenaries have overseen Russian efforts to meddle in the politics of Ukraine, Syria and several African countries.

The leader of the Libyan team, Maxim Shugaley, had been identified in news reports in 2018 trying to pay bribes and spread disinformation to turn elections in Madagascar. Tipped off by American intelligence, according to a person involved, a militia allied with the Tripoli provisional government eventually detained Mr. Shugaley and his interpreter. A third operative eluded capture, Libyan officials said.

After detaining Mr. Shugaley, the security agents found a report in his hotel room that his team had sent to Moscow in March of last year, shortly before the Hifter-Bolton call. Dossier, a London research center critical of Mr. Putin, obtained a copy of the seized report and provided portions to The New York Times. Senior Libyan officials authenticated the text independently.

For several years, Russia had provided military supplies to Mr. Hifter and printed millions of dollars in newly minted Libyan currency for him to distribute.

But the secret report showed that the operatives were much more skeptical of Mr. Hifter than were the Arab rulers advising the White House.

Mr. Hifter, now 76, had recurring health problems. He won few military victories and had instead gained territory by “buying off local tribal groups for the right to place the flag,” so that he could “raise his significance in the eyes of internal and external players,” the report stated.



Libya has been convulsed with conflict for nearly a decade. Mr. Hifter's forces captured the coastal city of Surt in January. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Not only did the operatives conclude that any advance on Tripoli was almost certain to fail, as did an offensive in 2014, they also warned that Mr. Hifter was stubborn and had become increasingly “difficult” to his Russian advisers.

“Hifter is using Russian help to increase his significance,” the operatives wrote, but “there is a serious basis to suggest that in the event of his military victory, Hifter will not be loyal to Russian interests.”

The operatives recommended the Kremlin hedge its bets on Mr. Hifter by allying with Seif al-Islam el-Qaddafi, the eldest son of the former dictator. The operatives said their “company” had acquired a stake in a pro-Qaddafi satellite network and revitalized its broadcasts.

A longtime partner to Russia under his father, Mr. Qaddafi, now 47, was imprisoned in Libya in 2011 before somehow regaining his freedom. Now he is at large and plotting a comeback, according to Libyans close to him and Western diplomats familiar with intelligence reports on his movements.

But the Russians also identified a new opening with Mr. Hifter: The Kremlin should insert paid mercenaries loyal to Russia into his faltering military. Sudanese paramilitary forces were ready to do the job, the operatives insisted, and could give Moscow crucial leverage.



Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group standing guard last year during a parade in Bangui, Central African Republic. The group's mercenaries also made their way to Libya to bolster Mr. Hifter's forces. Ashley Gilbertson for The New York Times

Game Changer

The contingents of mercenaries from the Wagner Group began arriving via Sudan last September, according to Western diplomats tracking their movements.

“That was the big game changer,” Ambassador Richard Norland, the American envoy to Libya, said at a recent briefing. “It’s clear the Russians see strategic advantage now in Libya — low risk and high gain.”

To deepen its influence, the Kremlin has also organized secret meetings in Moscow between Mr. Hifter's supporters and former officers in the Qaddafi-era military and security services, according to Western diplomats and other analysts who have spoken to Libyan participants.

Musa Ibrahim, a former Qaddafi spokesman, declined to comment on specific meetings in Moscow but acknowledged that Russia had been "bringing together" the Hifter and Qaddafi officers, especially since the assault on Tripoli.

This month, on the anniversary of Mr. Hifter's attack, the United Nations urged a halt to the fighting to respond to the coronavirus pandemic now spreading in Libya.

But Mr. Hifter has continued shelling Tripoli, even targeting a major hospital. And the Russian mercenaries have given Russia a de facto veto over any end to the conflict.

"This has been Russia's dream since World War II," said Fathi Bashagha, the interior minister of the Tripoli government, quoting Winston Churchill's wartime statement that Moscow saw Libya as the "soft underbelly" of Europe.

"To get Russian feet on Libyan soil."

David D. Kirkpatrick is an international correspondent based in the London bureau. He was previously the Cairo bureau chief, a Washington correspondent and a national correspondent based in New York. @ddknyt